

Summary of the June meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Wednesday 29th June 2016

6.00pm – 7.00pm

Boothroyd Room, Portcullis House

Chair: Tim Loughton MP, Co-Vice-Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Speakers: Winston Morson, Ambassador, British Association of Social Workers
Jack Smith, Care-experienced young person

Apologies: Bill Esterson MP, Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers
The Earl of Listowel, Vice-Chair of the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Topic: **Identity and stigma**

Debate motion: **'Care leavers should be willing to tell anyone they come into contact with that they have been in care.'**

Speaker comments (speakers were asked to present arguments for or against the motion and their comments do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation or individual)

Jack Smith spoke in support of the motion. Jack asked how negative stereotypes of care-experienced young people can be challenged if care leavers aren't brave enough to tell anyone they come into contact with that they have been in care. Jack said that the media portrays children and young people in care as being badly behaved and he said that the only way to change this stereotype is for care-experienced young people to tell their own story instead of having their stories told for them. Jack said that if young people do disclose they are in care they may be entitled to financial help from schools, colleges or universities and may also be able to get support from their local authority, for example, priority for housing and accommodation.

Jack gave an example of the benefits of disclosing one's care experience in everyday life. Jack said he went into Waitrose, who are partnered with John Lewis, and mentioned that he was a care leaver and living alone and the person working there offered to help him get free furniture from John Lewis.

Jack's closing argument was that care-experienced people may be thought of as more hardworking and resilient than someone who has had opportunities handed to them. He said that he had watched a TED talk where a speaker was explaining that employers should hire people who have had to get through tough experiences in life as it's likely that they'll be humble and cope better with challenging tasks.

Winston Morson spoke against the motion. Winston said that 'willing' implies that the care leaver has no control over their story and 'anyone' means that the care leaver disclosing their care experience could encounter prejudice and negativity.

Winston shared that his mother had once said she was going to a funeral of a 'matron' which she explained was the name used for women who used to run children's homes. Winston said that he questioned this and his mother went on to reveal that she lived in a children's home for three years with her siblings. He said that at the time he felt some disappointment as he couldn't understand why she hadn't told him before but these feelings soon changed to sympathy with regard to her struggles. Winston said that he later felt that it was his mother's decision to disclose this experience when she was ready and that people have a right to own their history and narrative.

Winston said that everyone can leave something out of their personal history like celebrities. He said that he struggled to find celebrity care leaver when he searched for them online and found that people tend to reveal that they're Nobel prize winners rather than care leavers. He said that social media allows the creation of an owned story or identity and that care leavers should be allowed to create their chosen identity - with or without care - and are more capable than ever of doing this.

Winston went on to discuss a piece of research that showed how poor life outcomes of care leavers, for example, homelessness, are not because of care, but pre-existing struggles and as long as this misconception exists it is not always 'safe' to disclose care leaver status without risk of prejudice. Winston's closing argument was that until things change in the care system to ensure that these prejudices are eradicated, care leavers should have the right not to tell people that they have been in care.

Attendees were asked to vote in support of or against the debate motion: the results were split equally (31 in favour, 32 against).

Discussion (the floor was opened to the debate)

Arguments in support of the motion

Care leavers from Who Cares? Scotland argued in support of the motion and said that having a care identity is a choice. They said that it provides an opportunity to learn about each other, a sense of a belonging, as well as an opportunity to educate others and changing the negative perception of care-experienced children and young people.

Care-experienced young people from EPIC (Republic of Ireland) argued in support of the motion. A young person in care said that they have always been comfortable telling people that they are care-experienced but know others in care who feel uncomfortable about disclosing their care experience. They said that during their time in residential care they saw their carers as family members and because of this positive association with care, they feel willing to tell people about their care experience and said that the public should be hearing about positive aspects of care more often. They added that training should be given to teachers about the many reasons why people go into care as they had an experience where, at the age of seven, a teacher asked them why their birth parents 'let them go into care'.

A care leaver said that no one should have to hide something about their identity when they don't have control over the stereotypes of care-experienced children and young people.

A professional argued for the motion but said it should be a choice. They said that the younger children they work with say that they feel different than others in school, for example, having

meetings during school time and noticing that their living environments are different to others. They said that if care experience is discussed more openly, the feeling of being different in a negative way may lessen.

A professional from a Children in Care Council (CiCC) said they had taken a poll with the members of the CiCC and the majority voted for the motion. Some comments from the members included: 'If people don't talk about their care experience openly, it won't improve how we're stereotyped', 'Why should I? It's no one's business', 'People have a right to privacy' and 'It only matters if it matters to you'.

A care-experienced barrister argued in support of the motion by saying that talking about one's care identity can educate people and can provide care leavers with support and opportunities both personally and professionally. They added that it also provides the opportunity to inspire other care-experienced children and young people.

A care leaver said that they had won an award from NYAS and experienced positive representation in the media regarding their achievements since leaving care. They said that a high percentage of sex workers and prisoners have been in care but a very low statistic go to university and there is something wrong with that contrast.

A care-experienced young person said they are making a film with NYAS about identity and stigma which is to be circulated to universities and social services around the UK.

A foster carer spoke in support of the motion and said they knew a professional who wanted to use the term 'careism'. They said that there should be a choice in disclosing but if care-experienced young people have experienced discrimination or haven't been given the services that they are entitled to, they should know who to go to and the more stories shared, the fewer 'isms' that will exist.

A care leaver said that people should be taught about the care system at school. They added that one's care identity should be embraced as something that will always be a part of them.

A care-experienced professional said that they went to a private school and were given support and opportunities there during their time in care.

Arguments against the motion

Care-experienced young people from VOYPIC (Northern Ireland) argued against the motion by saying that disabled people don't have to tell others what they're experiencing so this shouldn't be expected of care-experienced people. They added that sometimes disclosing one's care experience can make it difficult to get jobs as people tend to have prejudices about people in care. They said that because of this, they decided to start a project to help combat these prejudices.

Care-experienced young people from Voices from Care Cymru said that when people disclose their care experience, they can feel as if they should behave in the way society expects them to and fit the stereotype. They said that people can treat you differently to others and they shared their experience of constantly being asked if they were OK by colleagues because they are a youth worker and it was expected that they should feel upset by the work in their profession.

A professional from NYAS said that they are a disabled person and care-experienced and it's usually something they don't disclose. They also conducted a poll and said that the majority were against the motion as they felt that it's an individual choice when someone feels ready to disclose.

A care leaver said that they shouldn't have to tell anyone that they're care experienced. They said that they like to work for the things that they have and would rather not use their care experience to get the things that they want. They added that they don't want to make people feel sorry for them by telling people when they go to university as they are the same as everyone else.

A care-experienced young person asked why they should go through awkward questions and declare what they've been through with no choice.

A care-experienced professional said they work with young people in care who always ask what they had done wrong so until this perception is changed, it's the young person's choice to disclose their care-experience.

A care-experienced young person said it's really personal and no one needs to know about it - like someone's sexuality or religion.

Undecided

A care leaver said they were undecided but that young people should take advantage of the benefits from disclosing their care experience to colleges and universities. They said that they had moved to independent living and had to miss days off school but by telling the staff members that they were in care, they were much more understanding and supportive.

A health professional said they were undecided from a health perspective but added that it does help to take advantage of services etc. They said young people shouldn't be expected to declare their care experience and if they do, it's important that they are supported when sharing those experiences.

Attendees were asked to vote again in support of or against the debate motion: the majority voted against (32 in favour, 37 against).

Natasha Finlayson from The Who Cares? Trust thanked everyone who had travelled from other nations and said it was very interesting to hear the diversity of views. Natasha emphasised that the debate motion is used as a device and talking point to stimulate the discussion around identity and stigma. She said there will be further work conducted by The Who Cares? Trust and other organisations from the UK and Ireland focusing on the topic which is funded by the Big Lottery.

Thanks from the Chair

The Chair reminded attendees that comments made during the debate will be passed on to the Minister of State for Children and Families.